The Space Between: Intersubjective Possibilities of Transparency and Vulnerability in Art Education

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This paper argues for the pedagogical value of the pursuit of transparency and vulnerability in art education. The author defines transparency and vulnerability in the context of art, offering subsequent pedagogical examples of both. Possibilities are born through intersubjectivity and answerability, the Bakhtinian notion that considers "how shall I say [do] anything when the other can answer?" (Bakhtin, 1990; Nielsen, 2002). The author asserts that art educators should pursue an idea of transparency and encourage an open attitude toward vulnerability in their pedagogy to emphasize intersubjective relationships and social possibilities through art. The author discusses artwork by Kelli Connell and Ann Hamilton, museum exhibitions including John Cage's "Rolywholyover A Circus for Museum" and "Spirited Journeys: Self-Taught Texas Artists of the 20th century," and the Museum of Jurassic Technology as supporting examples.

> There are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds. All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view. (Haraway, 1991, p. 190)

What if we were to consider transparency, and its "other" vulnerability, as Bakhtinian dialogic subjects requiring each other for possibility to arise? In this paper, I argue that imagining the intersubjective landscape between transparency and vulnerability links these two concepts in ways that are beneficial to art education. Further, linking them dialogically creates pedagogical possibility in the field.

I understand transparency and vulnerability through the work of socio-linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin. Working in the early part of the 20th century, Bakhtin resisted a Cartesian understanding of self-other relations and was intensely interested in the structures of meaningful exchanges, both written and spoken. Additionally, he extended the arena of meaning-making to that of doing, everyday actions in the world. He advocated that actions (like speech acts) are best understood between subject and subject, not between subject and object. Bakhtinian scholar, Michael Gardiner (2000), characterizes this intersubjectivity as a necessary recourse in a world with limits to our knowing. According to Bakhtin, we can access more of the world, that is to say participate more fully and more meaningfully, within a dialogic intersubjective space. For Bakhtin, dialogue "stresses con-

tinual interaction and interconnectedness" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 57) and results in our ability to be present in the world as "individually and answerably active human beings" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 7). Working against this meaningful space of answerability are modern conditions that "privilege a purely cognitive relation to the other and our lived environment, which in turn reinforces an instrumental, disengaged attitude towards the world" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 48). Because art often seems to operate in North American culture without much thought to answerability, requiring a participative subject, there are many disconnects among general cultural beliefs.

On one hand, art comes with baggage. For many, art functions largely by the myth of genius, the transcendental mysteries of its origins, and awe-inspiring unknowability. On the other hand, North American culture, particularly US culture, is plagued by the legacy of "getting it right," whatever it is—finality and stasis are perceived as stable. In this vein, uncertainty and change should be minimized at all costs. So the question becomes, what is the space between the unknowable—on one hand—and predictable standardization, on the other? Certainly, there are many artists who actively work to undo the myths of art, but, somehow—*Juanita* (or Jane or Joe) *Q. Public's* perception of art persists—art is the mysterious creative gift bestowed upon the lucky or the weird. And *Juanita* (or Jane or Joe) *Q. Public* also asks that learning and the world be static, formulaic and predictable. Such wishes and realities lead to hegemonic systems of oppression and a lack of identified possibilities for imagining something else to be. Where else to look for such possibilities, but in the space between?

Figure 1. *The Space Between*. Photo by Kelli Connell (2002).

In Kelli Connell's large color photograph, *The Space Between* (2002), two figures cropped closely frame the image—one in profile, one in three-quarter view (see Figure 1). The middle third of the image is a blur of street and greenery, highlighting a drop of water on the end of the woman's nose on the right. She appears to have been caught in a sudden rainstorm. The woman on the left is dry, and looks at the other woman with an indiscernible expression on her face. She is definitely thinking something, but what? Who are these women? Why is one wet and one dry?

Upon closer inspection, it is barely noticeable that the women are actually, despite their different shirts, the same woman. More questions arise. How could this photograph of a seemingly real moment have been created? And to what is "the space between" referring? Is it the physical space between the two figures? Is it the psychical or emotional space between the two women, since they are

both in fact the same woman? What has occurred between the two figures resulting in such a scenario and how has the artist achieved such a contemplative moment that draws us into the story, into the space between these two figures' intimate yet impossible moment?

Connell's artwork representing the tension between what we expect a photograph to be, a stable moment captured in time, and the mystery of altering photo negatives to create an impossible scene, is an allegory for the spectrum of expected attitudes toward art. At one end of the spectrum, art is knowable, organized, and understandable and at the other end, art is a complete mystery. In thinking of the space between mystery and predictability, attitudes of vulnerability and an understanding of how vision (in the form of transparency) contributes to openness toward things new and challenging both hold powerful pedagogical potential. This paper examines the possible roles of transparency, metaphorical seeing through something that allows for openness and revealed politics, and vulnerability, exposure and openness for potentially significant change, in art education.

Transparency: What You See is What You Get?

With current trends toward user-created content on the Internet, transparency, or the illusion of transparency, in the forms of blogs and YouTube abounds. Transparency implies seeing it all, but one can never "see it all." Art instruction teeters on this delicate line revealing art's "secrets" to students, making art accessible and knowable to students, while at the same time acknowledging that art is indeed a mysterious endeavor.

I have found through pedagogical experiences, involving an explicit idea of transparency, that students demonstrated more access to and comfort with the "mysteries of art." A cursory examination online reveals contemporary circulation and use of this idea—the mysteries of art, a view particularly developed around Modern Art

and those artists' perceived acts of genius. But in thinking through how mysteries function in art learning, I relate three experiences here that suggest important points of how pursuits of transparency, as opposed to tools for unlocking the mysterious like the relentless use of the elements of art and the principles of design, can facilitate student learning in art.

"Rolywholyover": Seeing Power

The first event that I have chosen to discuss occurred early in my teaching career when I took my inner-city, low-income Latino middle school students to the Menil Collection, a privately-funded museum in Houston, Texas. That April experience was our first (and only, due to limited public school funds) field trip of the school year. An exhibition titled "Rolywholyover a Circus for Museum" by composer John Cage was on display that Spring, and we took advantage of the large packed gallery as well as the permanent galleries of the Menil Collection, during our visit.

It is useful to set up this experience through the contrast of "Rolywholyover" with the other more traditional galleries of the Menil Collection. Upon arriving at the museum, I gave my students an introduction to each section of the museum, before giving them time to wander as they wished in each section before we moved on to the next gallery. The first gallery consisted of many modern works, by such artists as Ellsworth Kelly, Francis Bacon and Michael Tracy. The second gallery was devoted to the Menil Collection's extensive Surrealism collection. Students saw work by Magritte, Duchamp and Exquisite Corpse. By this point in the semester, I was well into a Modern Art Curriculum that I had developed, so my students were familiar with ways of looking at artworks and knew a lot of context for many of the works of art, particularly the Surrealist work. Consequently, my students had looked at a lot of art reproductions and were quite free within the context of our cozy classroom to offer

opinions, criticism and interpretations; but, few of them had much experience at all in looking at art in a museum setting.

The activity guide I had created asked students to look at a few specific works of art, write descriptions, and discuss questions and feelings that accompanied their looking. They were asked to evaluate choosing best and worst pieces in each section and to explain their choices. They were also asked to choose one artwork to sit with and interpret. We then moved into the larger gallery where the Cage exhibition was installed, or rather continually in the process of being installed.

"Rolywholyover" is a word coined by James Joyce (in fact, Joyce used it as a verb), and it was chosen by Cage to capture his celebration of dynamism and change. The entire exhibition was constructed by randomness. Area museums donated pieces that were arranged by Cage's computerized I Ching. The traveling artworks were arranged and rearranged daily, at specific random hours, as the computerized random generator dictated. Pieces were listed by numbers, not names and artist identifications, and hung in unusual ways where the viewer was impressed by the extreme height at which some pieces were hung and the proximity of some hangings. There were quite a few installation pieces involving interactive video and computer terminals. Additionally, just outside the large gallery, there were drawers and drawers of items connected to Cage such as a letter from Ad Reinhardt and sketches and ideas from Merce Cunningham. The opening of each small drawer revealed new unexpected bits of information.

In constructing a guide for my students in this gallery, I tried to provoke a celebration of randomness and indeterminancy and emphasize the important roles these key concepts played in the exhibition. Students were asked to observe things that were different in this gallery as opposed to the more traditional ones we had just visited; they were asked to postulate why there were such differences. On the bus to the museum, students had been given numbers and

were asked to find artworks that had their digit in the listing. These randomly selected artworks were then described in terms of their installation, location, medium, and content. I asked them to consider why this was called a circus. They also had selected a random word from a hat (like "bowl," "shook," "spoon," and "gigantic"), and then had to ask three other students their words with a goal of composing a sentence using the four words. Also, I walked around with a tape recorder (the entire time we were in the gallery) recording sounds, student reactions, other patron's conversations, and installation sounds. Students were also asked to comment on my activities.

My students' experience in the "Rolywholyover" gallery, at the Menil museum, was the most significant of the entire field trip. Being able to assess the differences in the galleries, in terms of structure and order, gave them a tremendous sense that Cage was fooling with expectations. This could be characterized as the artist's subversion of conventions. The students observed in the first two galleries that the museum conventions were rather austere with didactic labels and gallery education, yet, this was disregarded in the "Rolywholyover" gallery.

The "Rolywholyover" gallery drew attention to, and required critical perception of, the mechanisms behind the exhibit and the power that controls which works are important and which are displayed prominently, and which are less so. In the other galleries, "Don't touch" or "Don't stand too close" was on their minds; in this gallery they observed expicitly the exhibition structure. The students saw the computer printing out the generated changes. They saw works being hung and taken down right in front of them. Students observed museum employees use gloves to handle artworks, and noticed how they touched the artworks. They questioned why some works were difficult to see because of where and how they were hung. They wanted to see more. They questioned why there were no guarantees that a work would be moved to a better display place

at another time. Students wondered how they could come back to see it again in a totally changed state. They wondered how this might change their impressions of the artwork.

My students definitely questioned the conventions of a museum. The differences in galleries were so marked that they were able to identify the areas where museums exercise power in the structuring of exhibitions. In short, the power behind the institution was revealed to them. Many of my students grasped this and were much freer in speaking to patrons, who were noticeably perplexed by the unconformity of "Rolywholyover." Their cooperative wonderment transgressed usual social limitations—age, ethnicity, language. Students saw power at work and realized it is mutable. Possibilities exist within institutional structures. The transparency of the "Rolywholyover" exhibition gave us cause to see otherwise and move beyond the realm of what is and consider the realm of what could be.

Self-Taught Artists: Seeing Possibility

A second pedagogical experience, with regards to transparency, occurred for me in 1998—with the installation of the exhibition "Spirited Journeys: Self-taught Texas Artists of the 20th Century" at the Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston. At the time I was teaching nearly 100 potential elementary generalist teachers at the University of Houston. These students as a population were generally female, aged 20-40, and very quick to self-declare their lack of creativity, their perceived deficit of artistic ability.

Each semester, I utilize museum exhibitions in my teaching to open up the artworld to students; hopefully, demystifying the perception of elitist institutions. "Spirited Journeys" was an exhibition of 38 self-taught artists from across Texas. Self-taught artists "may not have had access to formal schooling or the mainstream art discourse" (Ulbricht, 2000, p. 46). Assumptions are often made that these artists create "because of a need to sustain personal traditions or

communicate with self and others in local communities" (p. 46).

The experience of my students, who visited "Spirited Journeys" that semester, has remained in my consciousness for some time now. Like the "Rolywholyover" exhibition, "Spirited Journeys" was transformational for many of these students, future teachers, in terms of what they believed about art and its role in society. In thinking through the significance of the exhibition, I have repeatedly asked myself why this exhibition seemed to have more impact than other experiences I have shared with students over the years. I have come to believe that because my students saw the artists as ordinary people—single moms, grandmothers, felons, the religiously motivated—without special training, they could see themselves in the work. The exaggerated quality of lack of perfection, the obsessiveness, the prominence of faith, the family stories all provided entrance for the students to the world of art. The exhibition was accompanied by wonderful didactic material, describing each artist's motivation for making. Students could see in the variety of motivations, possible reasons to open up to art for themselves as well.

The compelling work made with ordinary materials, by untrained hands, showed another side of art that the students had rarely seen. Its presence in a museum encouraged students to ask themselves why art matters and what should be valued by institutions and by them. Seeing more of the story of art—being privy to more personal motivations for making art—led students to recognize transparency in art-making that they had not previously considered.

Museum of Jurassic Technology: Seeing Obfuscation

In contrast to the two previous pedagogical experiences involving transparency, let us consider the complex and somewhat humorous Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles (Culver City), California. The Museum of Jurassic Technology has as its mission: "The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California is an

educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic" (Museum of Jurassic Technology, n.d., ¶ 1). Visitors are caught up in the mystery of the museum and the mystery of art, almost immediately. The didactic labels in the museum are verbose, the audio tour is expertly obscure, and passageways are dimly lit, providing extra punch to the dramatic lighting on the various exhibits. Everything about the museum implies authoritative knowledge, but the bizarreness of the contents of the museum—a spore-growing ant, an image of the pope carved on a grain of rice, a bat that can fly through walls—asks the viewer to question every traceable fact, yet believe every outlandish claim.

The aura of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, because it indeed functions as a full-blown instance of performance art, is one meant to call attention to the mystique of art and our expected suspension of disbelief that frequently occurs within the visual realm. Clarity is obscured for even the most persistent visitor, the one who reads every word trying to get to the punch line about the theory of oblivion and walks away from the exhibit fully believing the developed theory of Hypersymbolic Cognition, albeit with a heavy dose of skepticism.

The pointed lack of transparency in the Museum of Jurassic Technology calls visual display, as well as the possibility of transparency, into question. After considering the Museum of Jurassic Technology, transparency and its goal of revealing all becomes a known impossibility, making all didactic labels, and all teaching about art, somewhat obfuscating, and ensuring that we only ever see at best a partial picture; however, the pursuit of transparency, not the achievement of transparency, I argue, remains an important path that opens many possibilities for art education.

The three pedagogical examples discussed above involved various levels of transparency and engendered a kind of trust on the part of students, where I was the student at the Museum of Jurassic

Technology. In general, the power of those moments came from student trust in what they were seeing. They did not feel duped by the often elusiveness and mystery of art. However, the Museum of Jurassic Technology reminds us (clearly) that full transparency is never possible and that our trust can be misused and can be limiting. The impossibility of transparency, no matter how desired, demands a look at the ways in which transparency is mobilized in our contemporary social landscape. I suggest that pursuits of transparency, while seemingly productive, require a concomitant understanding of vulnerability to realize fully the pedagogical possibilities of transparency in art education.

Vulnerability: Creating Safe Spaces for Seeing More

In combating oppression in learning, Freire (1970) advocated the important role of dialogue in striving toward transparency in pedagogy; but, certainly, transparency is hardly ever possible, and claims of transparency can often be unwittingly deceiving. We can never see everything. We know what you see is never all of what you get, so we must approach the world with a more humble, more vulnerable attitude. Art education can be very useful in developing this kind of mutual vulnerability.

Given that there is grand possibility for deception in trusting our eyes, pedagogy in contemporary art education must consider attitudinally what is needed to focus on pursuits of transparency. Recognizing that our vision is limited implies a need for seeing what others see also, what Bakhtin (1990) referred to as a need for other's "surplus of seeing" (p. 134). I propose that this is best achieved when a degree of vulnerability is acknowledged and mutually agreed upon in the pursuit of seeing what we each see.

Vulnerability is not usually considered a desirable condition. Vulnerability is typically conceived of in two veins: first, in the somatic sense, it has to do with physical survival—one is vulnerable

if one has weaknesses that can be exploited. The second sense has primarily a technological meaning, but is closely related to the first given today's social networking conflations of the virtual with the actual—vulnerability has to do with security in networks. In the technological world, vulnerabilities are meant to be identified and eradicated because of the threats they pose to the stability and security of any network.

By way of example, I want to describe a few vulnerable moments I have experienced personally with regards to art education as well as consider the work of an artist who actively confronts vulnerability, and finds it important and meaningful. My goal in describing these moments of vulnerability is to argue that an attitude of vulnerability accompanying pursuits of transparency creates not only more meaningful art education, but also reveals possibilities previously unseen.

First, I attended Terry Barrett's National Art Education Association (NAEA) presentation in Boston in 2005. During his session, on the last day of the conference, he introduced participants (as we were indeed positioned) to the photographs of two contemporary artists that were unfamiliar to most everyone in the room, but quite striking in their content and execution. Unfortunately, the names of the artists escape me, but the exercise that Barrett took us through does not. After discussion of a couple of the photographs, he asked us each to write down our interpretation of one image. He also asked us to write further how the selected image relates to our life. I selected a closely cropped photograph of carpenter vices and fabric, and pondered its relationship to my life as a working mother of two with all the pressures that entails.

Barrett then asked for volunteers to share their writing. The room filled with diverse voices and compelling interpretations that made hairs stand on end. A young woman interpreted a photograph of bottles as an allegory of her own womb. Another remembered

passion for her own art-making, her voice breaking as she described the joy such making brings, and her chosen photograph had inspired her to remember. I did not share my writing that day; but, I was so moved at being privy to other's vulnerability and their risk-taking, to offer me a chance to see what they see, that I have not forgotten that experience.

A similar experience happened while I was participating in a digital storytelling workshop with Joe Lambert, Founding Director of the Center for Digital Storytelling. He began the workshop asking us all to describe in writing a time when art moved us. I wrote about my first encounter with Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document at age 26, well before children were in my landscape. I described how this piece, especially its culminating dangling question mark at the end of the series of a mother's careful recordings and calculations about her newborn son, made me want to share this work of art with every woman I knew. I was alone when I saw it, and maybe that was why I agreed to share, when Lambert asked for volunteers. In the middle of giving voice to my description, my voice broke, belying the significance of this event for me. These two events made me realize, personally, that vulnerability is a necessary condition for seeing more. Had the participants in those two art educational experiences not embraced our vulnerability and had we kept our words to ourselves, the experiences would have been severely limited, or non-existent. We would not have shared meaning in and through art.

Ann Hamilton's recent and ongoing use of a pinhole camera in her mouth is an extension of her exploration of adaptive photography and video, including putting cameras on her fingers. In her *Face-to-Face* series (ongoing since 2001), she exposes a pinhole camera in her mouth at a distance of about a foot from the face of the person she is photographing for two minutes. The elliptical prints are ghostly, slightly blurred, and the lips resemble the shape of the eye—a dislocation of one sense to another that Hamilton claims is "one way

then we come to see something differently." (Simon, 2002, p. 12)

In her Art:21 interview on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series associated with spirituality, Hamilton goes on to address explicitly the vulnerable quality of the project:

> You know you're never supposed to have your mouth open in public ... It's a vulnerable position; it's a place where you've relaxed and you've let yourself be open and vulnerable in a way ... in the act of actually doing it, it became very interesting to register this time of standing quite still, face to face with another person, and to make oneself vulnerable, in fact, to another person...but there's another kind of strength that comes forward in allowing yourself to occupy that position. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2001, ¶ 4)

She adds further:

> But even in situations where it's more or less a stranger, that being willing to stand face to face or to turn and allow that kind of odd, formal, but very intimate act—that it's about opening ... it's about revealing something other than someone's physical features...you can have what feels like a very profound, oddly profound, moment, and yet you know there's nothing of that on the film. (¶ 10)

Hamilton is describing what Dewey (1934) names as "willingness," characterized as an undoing of elements that "in prior experience, got so bound together" that without some degree of unbounding, the perceiver will not be able to "interact freely without deflection or restriction" (p. 250). Attitudes comfortable with the unclear and the ambiguous are more likely to be willing to "disassociate" in order to engage with new, often challenging, art. This disassociation

is not some kind of critical distance from which to see a situation definitively, but rather it is willingness to engage and experience without a concept of fixity.

However, responsibility for partial visions and attitudes toward change and resistance lie with each person because each of us is "subject to the influence of custom and inertia, and has to protect himself [/herself] from its influences by a deliberate openness to life itself" (Dewey 1934, p. 304). Art education that enacts such deliberate openness by emphasizing the partiality and limitations of vision, transparency with all its wonderful yet limiting trappings, requires an acknowledged degree of vulnerability to unearth social possibilities in and between people. Bakhtinian answerability, a concept that reminds us to speak and act as if we will be answered, suggests that such intersubjectivity is best described as "co-being" that involves an unfinalized openness of the self-other relationship that is at the root of answerability (Nielsen, 2002, p. 47).

Naked and Vulnerable: Exploitations and Education

I conclude this article with a few recent explorations in transparency and vulnerability. First, the cover of *Wired* magazine, in April 2007, featured a female TV star from the sit-com, *The Office*, clad in her short skirt business suit holding a sign that said "Get Naked and … " and when you open the transparent cover, her clothes are gone replaced with a larger sign declaring:

> … Rule the World. Smart companies are sharing secrets with rivals, blogging about products in their pipeline, even admitting to their failures. The name of this new game is RADICAL TRANSPARENCY, and it's sweeping boardrooms across the nation… So strip down and learn how to have it all by baring it all.

The message of Thompson's article "The See-Through CEO" (2007) is about the possibilities and pitfalls of radical transparency. One blogger, Mark Safranski, who responded to Thompson's online writing of the article pre-publication, declared "Secrecy won't be dead. It will simply hide in plain sight. The hyperconnectivity and transparency of this kind of world accelerates the flow of information, creating incentives to hijack the process to push particular memes, including disinformation" (p. 137). Suddenly the intricate connections of transparency and vulnerabilities created by such transparency are very apparent.

A curious exercise in the realm of vulnerability is the *Post Secret* phenomenon where Frank Warren invites people to send him artworks on a postcard revealing an untold secret. Warren then posts selected ones on the *Post Secret* website each Sunday. There is an intricate relationship of vulnerability and transparency inherent in the *Post Secret* art project. Finally revealing a secret makes one feel vulnerable, but making it public, even transparent yet still somewhat private and hidden, is a safe kind of vulnerability. Judging from the kinds of secrets revealed at *Post Secret*—such as staying silent after rape, hypocritical racial prejudices or not revealing one's sexual feelings/actions—the *Post Secret* art project provides a space of moderate transparency and safe vulnerability. As I read the entries on the website or in the *Post Secret* books, I am struck by the breadth and depth of human suffering and experience. I enter an intersubjective space through the art project that enacts that openness of the self-other relation.

Art education that explores transparency while acknowledging the limits of our seeing (knowing), and cultivates a willingness to be vulnerable and to respect vulnerability in others, creates intersubjective possibilities. I agree with Gardiner (2000) that thinking and acting in a dialogic "participative fashion" yields a "creative entity that strives to attribute meaning and value to its life and surroundings" (pp.

49-50). Art education should look to answerability as exemplified here through transparency and vulnerability in order to cultivate in our students "continual communication with, and responsibility to, concrete others" (p. 51).

I argue, an open attitude toward transparency and vulnerability in art education holds the following benefits for students and teachers of art:

- It helps us see how important it is to see together. It helps us recognize we can never see the whole picture, and that relying on others to help us see more can minimize yet require personal vulnerability. Dialogic interpretation of works of art can enact this point in our pedagogy.

- It helps us understand that there are many ways to see the world, valuing multiple interpretations of what is seen and unseen.

- It helps us know that we can make something else to be because imagination is related to seeing more, or wanting to see more.

- It helps us develop comfort, with that which does not resolve into easy finality, and a degree of empathy for and with others in difficult and challenging situations.

Engaging with artworks, exhibitions, and art experiences that acknowledge and understand the relationships of transparency and vulnerability in the social processes of art will push art education into new arenas of social possibility.

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